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# Meanings and Indeterminacy in Gogol's *The Overcoat*\*

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**A**kaky Akakyevich is the central character of Gogol's story *The Overcoat*. Although Dostoyevsky gave common currency to the term "anti-hero" in *Notes from Underground*, it is Gogol's Akaky Akakyevich who is the genuine, unmitigated, and seemingly unredeemable anti-hero. For Dostoyevsky's anti-heroic paradoxalist, afflicted with hypertrophy of the consciousness, is well-read, cerebral, incurably bookish, and talkative. Akaky Akakyevich is hardly aware, and almost inarticulate. Gogol's artistic wager was to try to articulate this inarticulateness.

The story, in its plot line, is simple. A most unremarkable copying clerk in a St. Petersburg ministry—bald, pockmarked, short-sighted, and the scapegoat of his colleagues who invent cruel ways of mocking him—discovers one day that his pathetically threadbare coat no longer protects him against the fierce winter wind. The tailor he consults categorically refuses to repair the coat which is now beyond repair, and tempts Akaky Akakyevich into having a new overcoat made, one totally beyond his means, but which by dint of enormous sacrifices, he manages to acquire and wear with a newly discovered sense of pride. But his happiness lasts only one short day. Crossing a deserted quarter at night, he is attacked by two thieves who knock him to the ground and steal his coat. Drenched, frozen, deeply upset, brutally reprimanded by a superior whose help he dared seek, Akaky develops a fever, becomes delirious, and dies.

One can hardly speak of an interesting plot line. Yet this simple story lends itself to orgies of interpretations. In fact, there may be as many interpretations as there are readers. *The Overcoat* can be read as a parable, a hermeneutic puzzle, an exercise in meaninglessness. But to begin with, there is the temptation to read it seriously as satire with a social and

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\* Read 9 November 1990.

moral message. In *The Nose*, Gogol had already made fun of the rank-consciousness and venality of civil servants. In *The Overcoat*, he seems to deride systematically the parasitical, lazy, phony, world of Russian officialdom, whose members are the impotent mediators of a hierarchy of ineffectual power structure in which every subordinate fears and apes his superior. Early Russian critics, convinced that literature must have a moral message, read such a denunciatory and corrective satirical intention into the story even though it is clear that Gogol constantly shifts his tone, defends no apparent norm, and systematically ironizes any possible "serious" message.

There is of course the temptation to read *The Overcoat* as a tale of compassion, as a plea for brotherhood. The pathetically defenseless little clerk, taunted and persecuted by the group, remains blissfully oblivious to the cruel pranks of which he is the butt, intent on his humble copying activity. Only when the jokes become too outrageous, or interfere with his work, does he protest ever so mildly. But here the tone of the story seems to change. For Gogol introduces a young man, recently appointed to the same office, who is on the point of sharing in the general fun, and who is suddenly struck by the strange notes in Akaky's voice which touch his heart with pity and make him suddenly see everything in a very different light. A true revelation emanating from an "unnatural" (*neestestvennyi*) power allows him to hear other words behind Akaky's banal entreaty to be left alone. What he hears are the deeply penetrating, unspoken words echoing with poignant significance: "I am thy brother."

And with this voice from behind the voice comes the shocked awareness of how much "inhumanity" there is in human beings, how much brutality lurks in what goes as civilized society and civilized behavior. The apparent lesson in humanity given by the scapegoat victim seems, in the immediate context, to have an almost religious character, especially if one relates it to the narrator's comments, after Akaky's death, on how a man of meekness who bore the sneers and insults of his fellow human beings disappeared from this world, but who, before his agony, had a vision of the bright visitant (*svetluy gost*). The man of meekness, the man of sorrows, like the unspoken but clearly heard "I am thy brother," seems to have a Christian, if not Christological, resonance.

But we forget Akaky's name, and that we are not allowed to do. For the patronymic appellation not only stresses the principle of repetition (Akaky's first name being exactly the same as his father's), but the funny sound repetition is even funnier because the syllable *kak* = like (*tak kak* = just as) embeds the principle of sameness in Akaky's name, determining, it would seem, his single-minded, life-long activity of copying and implicit condemnation to sameness. Regarding the many years Akaky served in the same department, Gogol observes that he "remained in exactly the same place, in exactly the same position, in exactly the same job, doing exactly the same kind of work, to wit copying official documents." But there is better (or worse) especially to Russian ears, for *kakatj*

(from the Greek *cacos* = bad, evil) is children's talk for defecate, and *caca* in many languages refers to human excrement. To be afflicted with such a name clearly relates to the garbage being regularly dumped on Akaky as he walks in the street, and to his being treated with no more respect by the caretakers than a common fly. The cruel verbal fun around the syllable *kak* extends beyond the character's name, and contaminates Gogol's text. Gogol indulges in seemingly endless variations on the words *tak*, *kak*, *kakoi*, *kakoi-to*, *kakikh-to*, *vot-kak*, *neekak*, *takoi*, *takaya*, *kakni-but*, (just so, that's how, in no way, somehow, and so on) which in the translation disappear altogether. The exploitations of sound effects or sound meanings clearly correspond to a poet's fascination with the prestigious cacophonous resources of ordinary speech.<sup>1</sup>

One last point about the choice of Akaky's name, specifically the Christian act of "christening": according to custom, the calendar was opened at random and several saints' names (Mokkia, Sossia), including the name of the martyr Khozdazat, were considered, only to be rejected by the mother because they sounded so strange. Akaky was chosen because that was the name of the father. But Acacius, a holy monk of Sinai, was also a saint and martyr, and we find ourselves—especially since the Greek prefix *a* (Acacius) signifies: not bad, therefore good, meek, humble, obedient—back to the religious motif. If Akaky continues to copy for his own pleasure at home, this is in large part because the bliss of copying has a specifically monastic resonance. Gogol does indeed refer to his copying as a "labor of love."

Here a new temptation assails the reader. Should *The Overcoat* not be read as hagiography in a banal modern context, or at the very least as a parody of hagiography? A number of elements seem to lend support to such a reading of the story in or against the perspective of the traditional lives of the saints: the humble task of copying documents, reference to the theme of the martyr (*muchenik*), salvational terminology, sacrificial motifs or communion ("I am thy brother"), Akaky's visions and ecstasies, his own apparitions from beyond the grave. But the most telling analogy with hagiographic lore is the conversion-effect on others, first on the young man who has a revelation of a voice that is not of this world (*svet*), and toward the end the self-admiring, domineering, Very Important Person on whom Akaky's ghost-like apparition makes a never-to-be-forgotten impression.<sup>2</sup>

The overcoat itself can take on religious connotations because clothing, in the symbolism of the Bible and orthodox liturgy, often represents righteousness and salvation. The only trouble with such an interpretation—and Gogol has written *Meditations on the Divine Liturgy* which

<sup>1</sup> Boris Eichenbaum speaks of Gogol's "phonic inscriptions" and "sound-semantics" in "How 'The Overcoat' is Made," in *Gogol from the Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert A. Maguire, Princeton University Press, 1974, p. 280.

<sup>2</sup> See John Schillinger, "Gogol's 'The Overcoat' as a Travesty of Hagiography," *Slavic and East European Journal*, Spring 1972, 16, 1: 36–41.

refer to the priest's robe of righteousness as a garment of salvation<sup>3</sup>—is that the coat can have an opposite symbolic significance, that of hiding the truth. Hence the traditional image of disrobing to reveal the naked self. In addition, there are many other possible meanings quite remote from the religious sphere: the metonymic displacement of the libido (the Russian word for overcoat—*shinel*—is appropriately feminine), the effects of virilization (in his new coat, Akaky surprises himself in the act of running after some woman in the street!), loss of innocence and loss of "original celibacy."<sup>4</sup> The coat itself thus turns out to be a form of temptation (material acquisition, vanity, pride), and the devilish tailor is the agent of this temptation just as the writer or narrator (who in fact is he?) "tempts" the reader into a succession of vacuous and mutually canceling interpretations.

This provocative writer-reader relationship, sustained throughout the narration, casts a special light on Akaky's fundamental activity of copying—the act of writing in its purest form. It does not take much imagination (our modern critics discover self-referentiality everywhere) to see in Akaky's copying an analogue of the writer's activity. And like the proverbially absorbed writer or scholar, he is obsessed by his writing to the point of finding himself in the middle of the street while thinking that he is in the middle of a sentence. This self-absorbed and self-referential nature of Gogol's act of writing might be seen to imply a negative attitude toward the referential world, toward all that which is not writing. Much like Flaubert, who dreamt of composing a "book about nothing," and whom contemporary critics like to view as an apostle of self-referential, intransitive literature, Gogol yearns for monastic withdrawal. Flaubert was haunted by the figures of the monk and the saint. Similarly, Gogol explained in a letter: "It is not the poet's business to worm his way into the world's marketplace. Like a silent monk, he lives in the world without belonging to it . . ."<sup>5</sup>

Pushed to a logical extreme, this sense of the radical deceptiveness of life calls into question worldly authority, and leads to a destabilizing stance that challenges the principle of authority, a subversive *gesta* of which the real hero is the artist himself. There is indeed something devilish about Gogol's narrative voice. It has already been suggested that the devil makes an appearance in the figure of the tailor who tempts Akaky into buying the coat. This caricature of the sartorial artist who quite literally is the creator of the overcoat, this ex-serf sitting with his legs crossed under him like a Turkish pasha, has diabolical earmarks: he is a "one-eyed devil" living at the end of a black staircase; he has a de-

<sup>3</sup> See Anthony Hippius, "Gogol's *The Overcoat*: A further Interpretation," *Slavic and East European Journal*, Summer, 1976, 20, 2: 121-129. Hippius points out (p. 123) that Gogol, in his *Meditations on the Divine Liturgy* quotes Psalms 132:9: "Let thy priests be clothed with righteousness. . . ."

<sup>4</sup> The expression is Charles Bernheimer's, in his fine essay "Cloaking the Self: The Literary Space of Gogol's 'Overcoat,'" *PMLA*, January 1975, 90, 1: 53-61.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to Pogodin, quoted by Charles Bernheimer (op. cit., p. 53) and Donald Fanger, *The Creation of Nikolai Gogol*, Harvard University Press, 1979.

formed big toenail, hard and thick as a tortoise shell; he handles a thrice-referred-to snuff box on which the face of a general has been effaced (the devil is faceless); he seems to be nudged by the devil and charges "the devil knows what prices."<sup>6</sup>

This verbal playfulness seems to extend to the narrator himself, who undercuts his own narration in truly diabolical fashion by means of grotesque hyperbolizing, mixtures of realistic and parodistic elements, sudden shifts from the rational to the irrational, and elliptical displacements from epic triviality to unrestrained fantasy. Indulging in a game of mirages and fog-like uncertainties, the narrator subverts the logical progression of his story. Ultimately, even the ghost is debunked, and we are back in the blackness of quotidian reality. In the Russian text, these shifts in tone and textual instabilities are even more insidious, since everything seems to blur into the undifferentiated flow of seemingly endless paragraphs.

This merging of discontinuities undermines any sense of plot, undercuts the notion of subject, and suggests at every point that what is told is *another* story, thereby teasing the reader into endless interpretations that can neither be stabilized nor stopped. Some of this is the inevitable result of a mimesis of inarticulateness, a narrative style that is the imitative substitute for Akaky's manner of communicating mostly through prepositions, adverbs, and "such parts of speech as have no meaning whatsoever." But the strategy of destabilization and fragmented diction also has a deeper subversive purpose. The non sequiturs and hesitations reveal the arbitrariness of any fictional structure, and in the last analysis subvert any auctorial authority. The concluding page of *The Nose* represents an authorial critique of the story as incomprehensible and useless. The mediating self-negator is the fictionalized narrator identified in *The Overcoat* as the *raskazyvaiushyi*—the narrating one. And this narrator, occasionally pretending to be ignorant or semi-ignorant (like Cervantes's narrative voice as of the very first sentence of *Don Quixote*) does not know in what town, on what day, on what street the action takes place—in fact, complains of loss of memory. All this, however, only accentuates the possible importance of the unknowable and the unsayable, while protecting the protagonist's sacred privacy. The narrator clumsily speculates on what Akaky might or might not have said to himself as he stares at an erotic window display in the elegant quarter of St. Petersburg, and he concludes: "But perhaps he never even said anything at all to himself. For it is impossible to delve into a person's mind [in Russian, literally: to creep into a person's soul]."

*The Overcoat* is thus marked by conflicting and enigmatic signals, pointing to oxymoronic textures of meanings. Inversions hint at conver-

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<sup>6</sup> Dmitry Chizhevsky, who stresses the presence of the Devil in "*The Overcoat*," writes: "As someone who was well read in religious literature, as a connoisseur and collector of folklore materials—from popular songs and legends—Gogol of course knew about the Christian and folk tradition that the Devil is faceless" ("About Gogol's 'Overcoat,'" in *Gogol from the Twentieth Century*, p. 320).

sions. What is seemingly up is in fact seen to be down, while the reverse is equally true. The downtrodden creature turns out to be capable of heroic sacrifices, while the powerfully constituted VIP with the appearance of a *bogatyř* (hero) is cut down to human size by fright. On the other hand, when Akaky's fall is likened to a disaster such as destroys the czars and other great ones of this earth, one may well feel that Gogol is ironic about all heroic poses, heroic values, and heroic figures. When Akaky wears the new coat, his pulse beats faster, his bearing seems to indicate a newly discovered sense of purpose (*tzel*), his eyes have an audacious gleam, he appears somehow to have almost become virile. Yet the overcoat is also the emblem of false values, of trivial passion, of a silly reason for a human downfall. One might wish therefore to read a deeper significance into these mutually canceling interpretations. In English, the word *passion* is fraught with a multiple significance: in the ordinary sense, it denotes intense and even overwhelming emotion, especially of love; yet etymologically, it signifies suffering. Love and suffering are of course linked in a grotesque manner in *The Overcoat*. Whether such love and such suffering are commensurate with any objective reality remains unresolved in this story which seems to say that any love is great no matter what its object, that love is all-powerful; and conversely, that any passion can drag one down, that the more intense it seems, the emptier it is. Gogol's style is in itself an admirable instrument of ambivalence: enlarging trivia, and thereby trivializing what we may for a moment be tempted to take as significant.<sup>7</sup>

What complicates Gogol's text for the reader is that it is not a case of simple ambivalence. It will not do to praise Gogol as a compassionate realist with an ethical message or to see him as a playful anti-realist indulging in overwrought imagery and in the reflections of distorting mirrors. The hard fact is that Gogol is a protean writer whose simultaneity of possible meanings allows for no respite and no comfortable univocal message. If the narrator is center stage, it is because ultimately he becomes a performer, a buffoonish actor mimicking incoherence itself. Intelligent readers of Gogol—Boris Eichenbaum, Vladimir Nabokov, Victor Erlich, Charles Bernheimer, Donald Fanger<sup>8</sup>—have in varying degrees and with different emphases, understood that rather than indulging in a feast of ideas to be taken seriously, Gogol delighted in verbal acts as a game—a game that implied the autonomy of narrative style, a declaration of artistic independence, and a thorough deflation of *l'esprit de sérieux*.

<sup>7</sup> I am largely indebted to Dmitry Chizhevsky who has admirably shown how the repeated and incongruous use of the adverb "even" (*daje*) breaks up the logical train of thoughts, enlarges trivia, and frustrates the reader by making the insignificant seem significant, and vice versa. Such a narrative strategy is related by Chizhevsky to the semantic oscillations of the text ("About Gogol's 'Overcoat,'" in *Gogol from the Twentieth Century*, pp. 295–322).

<sup>8</sup> Boris Eichenbaum, op. cit.; Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, New Directions, 1944; Victor Erlich, *Gogol*, Yale University Press, 1969; Charles Bernheimer, op. cit.; Donald Fanger, op. cit.

Perhaps there is an underlying autobiographic urge in *The Overcoat*, and the verbal clowning and narrative pirouettes are telling a story in which the irrational takes on an exorcising and liberating virtue—much as the idiosyncrasies of Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* present a vehement protest against spiritually deadening rationality. What is certain is that Gogol needs to wear a mask. Haunted by the monsters born of his imagination, afraid to be unmasked, Gogol literally disappears in his writing by becoming a multiplicity of voices.<sup>9</sup>

But there is a danger in depicting Gogol as an escape artist struggling against his own demons at the same time as he struggles against the repressive reality he wishes to deny. Similarly, there is the risk of considerable distortion in the determination of formalist and post-structuralist critics to draw Gogol to the camp of radical modernity by seeing him exclusively concerned with speech acts and sheer rhetoricity. Polyvalence does not mean the absence of meaning. The real problem, much as in the case of Flaubert, who complained of the plethora of subjects and inflationary overfill of meanings, is that over-abundance and multiplicity become principles of indeterminacy. Excess is related to emptiness. Similarly, Gogol seems torn between the futility of experience and the futility of writing about it, between the conviction that writing is the only salvation, and that it is powerless to say the unsayable—aware at all points of the gulf between signifier and signified.

Nabokov may have come closest to the heart of Gogol's dark playfulness when he wrote: "The gaps and black holes in the texture of Gogol's style imply flaws in the texture of life itself. . . ." <sup>10</sup> To this one might add, however, that the hollowness of the gaps, the terrifying absence, is also an absence/presence: a void that asks to be filled by the interpretive act. The dialectics of negativity, so dependent on the antiheroic mode embodied by Akaky, displace the production of meaning from the almost non-existent character and undecidable text to the creative reader.

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<sup>9</sup> Victor Erlich has very convincingly discussed Gogol's motif of the mask and tendency to "speak in somebody else's voice" in his chapter "The Great Impersonator" in *Gogol*, op. cit., pp. 210–223. Gogol himself writes: "If anyone had seen the monsters that issued from my pen, at first for my own purposes alone—he would certainly have shuddered" (quoted by Valery Bryusov in his essay "Burnt to Ashes," reproduced in *Gogol from the Twentieth Century*, p. 111).

<sup>10</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, op. cit., p. 143.